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ABSTRACT

In 1995 Cerritos College (California) introduced a learning community model that combines curriculum development, classroom technology, and cultural awareness sensitivity in order to strengthen student academic success. This model is different from interdisciplinary projects and blended curriculum in that the design not only focused only on student academic impact via faculty-to-student interaction, but it also creates a strong premise for student-to-student and faculty-to-faculty interaction. Each year the learning community clusters highlight a featured theme for enhancing student skills: college readiness, communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and, for 1999-2000, multimedia technology. In examining student responses to questions designed to assess content, delivery, and feedback, the majority of students surveyed perceived the learning community format as beneficial for understanding and retaining content. Student performance was enhanced by immediate feedback. Respondents found course material easier to learn when presented in a practical context in a number of different ways. This report also includes discussions on the cooperative learning environment and instructional delivery methods. (AS)

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Cerritos College Learning Communities: Exploring and Understanding Diverse Perspectives

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CERRITOS COLLEGE

Learning Communities

Exploring and Understanding Diverse Perspectives

By, JoAnn Smartt-Gaither

Since August 1995, Cerritos College located in Norwalk, CA has developed and implemented the Learning Communities approach to instruction in order to strengthen student academic success. For the past four years as part of the Title III Grant to Hispanic-serving institutions, the Activity 1 project has implemented more than 30 Learning Community clusters of 70 classes and impacted the lives of over 500 students.

The innovative, future-oriented and technologically advanced interdisciplinary Learning Community model organized at Cerritos College incorporates curriculum development, classroom technology and cultural awareness sensitivity. To implement it several specialists and researchers of student learning and assessment were invited to the campus to aid in designing a new integrated curriculum.

Faculty members interested in integrating into this new teaching dynamic were invited to participate in workshops; seminars and training sessions designed to integrate curriculum with the new learning technologies and highlighting computing, multimedia and telecommunications.

What is a Cerritos College Learning Community?

The learning community concept is not new. It is has been called many things in the past from interdisciplinary projects to blended curriculum, but the basic format is the same. Faculty members are paired or grouped to bring a cross discipline approach to instruction and learning. What makes the Cerritos College model unique is that the design is not just focused on student academic impact via faculty-to-student interaction, but it creates a strong premise for student-to-student and faculty-to-faculty interactions.

Under the leadership of Ana Torres-Bower, Director of Title III Activity 1, the faculty are encouraged to learn more about the process of transforming their classrooms into communities for active learning. Torres-Bower provides a forum for the exchange of ideas and approaches, while also promoting individual professionalism and growth.

In peer led sessions known as "Best Practices", faculty groupings discuss and exchange innovative methods for improving student retention, performance, learning and success.

Under the Cerritos College Title III Activity 1 proposed framework for "Strengthening Student Academic Success", each year the Learning Community clusters highlight a featured theme for enhancing student skills. In years one through four, course modules infused respectively, college readiness, communication, critical thinking and teamwork into the curriculum and teaching strategies. Year Five, 1999 – 2000, features multimedia technology and is a

perfect backdrop to the self-proclaimed status of the college, which heralds itself as "the most technologically advanced community college in the state".

Cerritos College has experimented with clusters of two, three and even four classes. It has been demonstrated by satisfaction surveys and attrition rates that the dyad format is the most successful. Participants, once enrolled, know that dropping any one course of the community is an automatic drop from all the courses. To aid in the total success of those enrolled in Cerritos College Learning Communities orientations are given to both faculty and students and a wealth of resources and support services benefit retention efforts.

Methodology

At the onset of the Learning Community course, students complete a Time 1 survey to identify their level of exposure, comfort, and familiarity with key college success tools and self-reported current skill levels (e.g., study skills, vocabulary, and computer knowledge). They provide information on perceived importance of various instructional delivery methods (e.g., lecture or discussion), and indicate why they chose to enroll in a Learning Community. The Time 1 Survey serves as a collection point for baseline data. A Time 2 Survey, administered at the end of the semester provides a point of comparison for "before and after" snapshots of student perceptions of the interdisciplinary teaching strategies.

The Time 2 responses when compared to the Time 1 responses afford Cerritos College the opportunity to examine behavioral changes that might have

occurred as a result of Learning Community involvement. In both surveys students are also asked to provide open-ended information about their Learning Community experiences, providing qualitative as well as quantitative feedback.

Outcomes based on the Fall1998-1999 combined qualitative and quantitative data, the following observations are made:

Learning Community Course Enrollment: Why do students enroll in Learning Communities? Over half of the students surveyed cited the following reasons (most often cited listed first):

-The learning community concept seemed interesting (57%)
-The learning community unit load met my needs (57%)
-Taking the combination of courses would be beneficial (51%)
-Interested in the combination of classes offered (44%)
-Thought the learning community would be convenient (42%)
-Learning community courses are transferable (26%)

Self-Reported Skill Level: Learning Community students were asked to rate their skill level in a number of areas. The highest rated skills were: (in rank order, highest first)

- vocabulary (76%)
- critical thinking (75%)
- oral presentations (64%)
- study skills (56%)

The lowest self-reported skills were (in rank order, lowest first):

- time management (35%)
- Internet skills (28%)
- e-mail skills (15%)

Faculty Involvement

Research indicates that there will be profound changes in the roles of faculty and their relationships to students and to one another. The traditional model of the lone faculty member lecturing to students sitting in rows in an isolated classroom was never particularly effective educationally. The wave of the future shows faculty deeply involved in mentoring, serving as managers of an array of learning resources, using technology to deliver essential information, leaving them freer to interact with student. This is the Cerritos College Learning Community concept.

In examining student responses to questions designed to assess content, delivery and feedback, it appears that the vast majority of students surveyed perceived the learning community format as beneficial for understanding and retaining content. Students felt course material was easier to retain if presented in a practical context. Respondents found course material easier to learn and retain when the instructor presented the information in a number of different ways.

Critical thinking formats indicate that teacher evaluation and immediate feedback are instrumental in student success. Learning Community students surveyed indicated that it was easier to learn course material when they had immediate feedback about their performance in the course.

Cooperative Learning Environment

Research indicates that collaboration is beneficial to both faster and slower students, helping students gain mastery of course material and learning from peer role models, respectively. Learning Community students surveyed indicated that they enjoyed working in groups with other students . When asked to evaluate their current skill level -*"networking with other students"* increased substantially from Time 1 to Time2.

One notable finding is that, while students felt they entered Cerritos College with the necessary basic skills to succeed in most courses, the motivation to succeed in their courses decreased by almost 10% from Time 1 to Time 2. This could possibly be explained by the fact that many felt overwhelmed with work and time management issues surfaced often.

Instructional Delivery Methods

During the Learning Community course, students still appear to be most comfortable with traditional instructional delivery methods. However, students reported that while classroom participation was important or very important to learning, they believed that lectures were becoming less important. Guest speakers seemed a welcomed addition to classroom instruction.

Concluding Observations

The students who participate in Learning Communities feel the overall experience is a very positive one, especially from the aspects of shared learning

experiences, faculty and peer support, increased personal interaction with faculty, and the ability to express themselves in the small group setting.

Though few, disadvantages are similar among the respondents in that they are overwhelmed with work and feel obligated to remain in the community. Under the guidelines established to help with retention, a drop from one class is an automatic drop from the other linked course(s) Many self-diagnose that proper or improved time management skills would alleviate many of their stresses. From both a quantitative and qualitative slant, the Learning Community concept is a very viable and well received teaching-learning model, which shows a promising future as a part of the Cerritos College framework for academic success for students.

In their own words students state that participating in a Cerritos College Learning Community is like...

"being in a family. You have to cooperate with others and believe in yourself to be successful."

"building a house; if many people cooperate the product will be of a better quality and would be finished sooner."

"a big cleaning project, it seems like a formidable and unattainable task at first, but if you take it piece by piece, you will eventually complete it successfully."

"putting together a puzzle; once all of the work of putting the pieces in order is complete, the end result is what you expected."

Information on student satisfaction based on whether the student would enroll in another Learning Community or recommend the Learning Community course to a friend, shows that although 79% had never enrolled in the Learning

Communities before, they would again if suitable classes are offered. Ninety-two percent express that they would recommend the format to a friend.

Complete program format, survey statistical data, course offerings, and faculty assignments are available on the web site at:

http://www3.cerritos.edu/title-iii/learning.htm

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